



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

John Milbank, The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate Concerning the Supernatural

Citation for published version:

Grumett, D 2006, 'John Milbank, The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate Concerning the Supernatural', *New Blackfriars*, vol. 87, no. 1008, pp. 198-199. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.0139a.x>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.0139a.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.0139a.x)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

New
Blackfriars

Publisher Rights Statement:

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: Grumett, D. (2006), THE SUSPENDED MIDDLE: HENRI DE LUBAC AND THE DEBATE CONCERNING THE SUPERNATURAL by John Milbank, SCM, London, 2005, Pp. x+117 £16.99 pbk.. New Blackfriars, 87: 198-199], which has been published in final form at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.0139a.x>. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving.

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



THE SUSPENDED MIDDLE: HENRI DE LUBAC AND THE DEBATE CONCERNING THE SUPERNATURAL by John Milbank, *SCM*, London; *Eerdmans*, Grand Rapids, Mich., 2005, £16.99/\$20, Pp. x+117 pbk.

Henri de Lubac has been an abiding presence in John Milbank's work over at least 20 years, but this volume is his first extended treatment of the French Jesuit's theology. He is rightly convinced of De Lubac's eminence, identifying him along with Sergei Bulgakov as 'one of the two truly great theologians of the twentieth century', and stating that *Surnaturel* was 'almost as important an event of cultural revision as *Being and Time* or the *Philosophical Investigations*' (pp. 104, 63).

The book achieves two distinct objectives. The first is to delineate the theology of the supernatural as developed by De Lubac in the standard texts but also lesser-known ones. Five of the nine chapters are virtual transcriptions of Milbank's essay on De Lubac in the new third edition of *The Modern Theologians* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), but are here more conveniently contained within a slim volume. The book's second objective, pursued through the later chapters, is to demonstrate the true originality and greatness of the *surnaturel* theology and to present its full implications.

Of particular interest is the discussion, omitted from *The Modern Theologians*, of *Pic de la Mirandole* and the 'Tripartite Anthropology' essay, in which De Lubac outlines one part of his projected, but never completed, study of mysticism. These radical yet later writings demonstrate that De Lubac's creativity was not permanently extinguished during the dark years immediately following the 1950 encyclical *Humani generis*, and that he remained committed to the Christian humanist ideals of freedom and personal dignity. The true origin of these values is the cosmology of Maximus the Confessor rather than antique paganism or the deceptions of Marx, Feuerbach or Nietzsche.

De Lubac's theology is allied intimately with his biography, as Milbank recognizes in an insightful assessment of his silencing by *Humani generis*. Some other biographical claims need clarifying. De Lubac was not in touch with the Gaullist or other resistance movements (p. 3), and actively spurned attempts to solicit his involvement, rebuffing even a brother of De Gaulle who visited him for this purpose. Throughout the war, De Lubac prosecuted a policy of spiritual, rather than militant, resistance to Nazism which would bring him close to the vision of Christian polity founded on an ontology of peace that Milbank espouses in *Theology and Social Theory*. Another potentially confusing statement occurs in the book's very first sentence, which asserts that De Lubac—who was born in 1896—was 'educated at Jesuit centers in France and England before the First World War' (p. 1). This is technically true if taken as referring to his time at school and his novitiate. His main intellectual formation took place, however, well after the war: philosophy on Jersey from 1920 to 1923, and theology at Ore Place, Hastings from 1924 to 1926, when the Jesuit exile ended, then at Fourvière until 1928. Perhaps as a result of this predating of his formation, De Lubac's importance during the interwar years tends to be overstated and the foundations for *nouvelle théologie* laid by the previous generation of Jesuits in exile—Léonce de Grandmaison, Joseph Huby, Ferdinand Prat, and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, to name but four—not acknowledged. De Lubac himself identifies the patron of the society 'La Pensée', in which the first sketch of *Surnaturel* was born, as Huby. These obscure origins of *nouvelle théologie* in an English seaside town are little understood, however, and would make a fascinating doctoral research project.

The 'suspended middle' title comes from the description in Hans Urs von Balthasar's study of De Lubac's theology (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991)—currently the only introduction available in English—of De Lubac's predicament 'in which he could not practice any philosophy without its transcendence into theology, but also any theology without its essential inner structure of philosophy' (p. 11). Balthasar concluded his own book by emphasizing the paradoxical character of the resulting theology. Milbank, however, perceives the aporetic quality that abides, in which philosophy is sometimes practiced before theology, and some theology

beyond philosophy. These shifting boundaries become particularly apparent, I would add, in De Lubac's essays on concrete issues like church-state relations.

The argument later moves into new territory. Milbank, inspired by Thomist phenomenologists like Olivier Boulnois and Jacob Schmutz, interrogates De Lubac's 'stuttering' (p. 7) with the type of interpretation of Aquinas for which he is well-known and which tends to elide various dualisms: spirit is linked intrinsically to grace, rather than being purely natural; the entire created order is drawn, through humanity, to beatitude; grace is gratuitous because contractual, and thus presented as *influentia* or providential teleology rather than gift. The result is a 'non-ontology', or in Claude Bruaire's words, an 'ontodology' (p. 96). This discussion proceeds with Milbank's characteristic flair and panache and is the most arresting part of the book.

The brief final chapter on the limits of De Lubac's theology in a receptive feminine model of the Church and of its laity raises questions that could provide openings for future work. Milbank bases this concluding assessment of De Lubac on the latter's meditation on Teilhard de Chardin's 1918 essay 'The Eternal Feminine', which presents both these great thinkers at their weakest, especially when under the scrutiny of the modern academy. De Lubac's extensive ecclesiological writings, or the outstanding study of them by Paul McPartlan, receive in contrast no attention. Related images in De Lubac's later monograph *The Motherhood of the Church* include birth, baptism, feeding, education, martyrdom, and attractive spiritual power, and suggest a more active notion of womanhood and lay ecclesiology than the obviously dated notion of femininity. They also provide suggestive models for the mutuality of nature and its sustenance which transcend the crude extrinsicist views of grace whose incoherence De Lubac and Milbank both convincingly demonstrate. They should go at least part of the way towards providing 'something paradoxically passive-active, and radically passive only in the sense that the most active human action is passive in relation to God' (p. 105). Perhaps De Lubac is even greater than Milbank is yet willing to admit.

DAVID GRUMETT